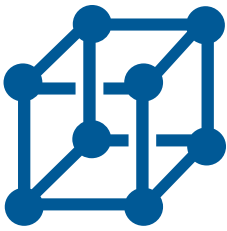


The Guardian

The Guardian is a quarterly law journal published by the **National Association of Counsel for Children** exclusively for its members.



YOUTH PERSPECTIVE

Permanency Beyond a Home

By LilCrystal Dernier, MS, MNM

Imagine you're in a room filled with different items old and new; you're directed to create a collage using those items. Naturally, you want the collage to look beautiful and perfect. But at some point, you will no longer focus on perfection but will use the items to your best ability to achieve your goal. Like the collage, when a child enters foster care, a permanency goal is set in place. However, the system involves a number of players, institutions, and programs that will have the ultimate impact on children and youth in achieving their permanency goal.

The foundation of promoting permanency for children and youth in care was established by the Adoption and Safe Families Act.¹ Permanency is founded on the idea that every child has the right to grow up in a healthy, nurturing, safe, and family-like environment.² Numerous studies have indicated the critical role of family in a child's financial, social, and psychological development.³ However, the idea of every foster youth being

1 Amy M. Salazar, Kevin R. Jones, Jamie Amemiya, Adrian Cherry, Eric C Brown, Richard F Catalano, and Kathryn C Monahan. "Defining and Achieving Permanency among Older Youth in Foster Care." *Children and Youth Services Review*. Volume 87, April 2018, Pages 9-16. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0190740917308204?via%3Dihub>.

2 Madelyn Freundlich, Rosemary Jane Avery, Sara Munson, and Sarah Gerstenzanga. "The Meaning of Permanency in Child Welfare: Multiple Stakeholder Perspectives." *Children and Youth Services Review*. Volume 28, Issue 7, July 2006, Pages 741-760. Available at: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0190740905001969?via%3Dihub>.

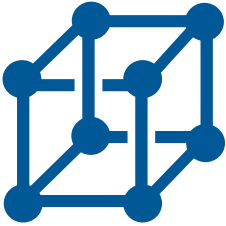
3 See, *supra*, footnote 1.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

LilCrystal Dernier, MS, MNM, is a native-born Floridian and an alumnus of Broward County's foster care system. Ms. Dernier is a Volunteer Child Advocate with the Seventeenth Judicial Circuit in Broward County, FL and serves on NACC's National Youth Advisory Board. She currently works as a Success Coach with YMCA of South Florida where she assists and advocates for at-risk youth by providing well-rounded support to ensure their academic and personal success. Ms. Dernier has over five years of experience in child advocacy, including as a Foster Youth Intern (FYI) at the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute (CCAI) and a Congressional Intern with former U.S. Senator Bill Nelson (D-FL) in Washington D.C. Ms. Dernier is preparing to attend law school to study family law and is an active minister in her local church.



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adopted or reunified with their biological family before “aging out” is not the reality for many foster youth. In 2018, it is estimated that approximately 17,844 youth aged out of the system.⁴ We must acknowledge the reality that legal permanency isn’t achievable for every youth, but there is a way to ensure they achieve permanency in transition.

Youth that age out of the foster care system will no longer be eligible to receive services provided by the child welfare system at some point, depending on their state. Thus, they’re expected to find employment, attend college, take care of their basic needs and be independent. As a result, they’re more prone to negative outcomes; hence greater attention should be given to youth who do not achieve legal permanency.

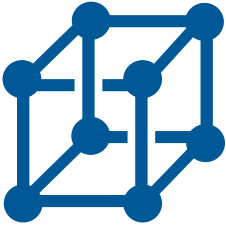
I entered foster care at the age of 10, attended 8 different schools, and stayed in a total of 11 placements, including foster homes, group homes, and shelters. In my lived experience, legal permanency was never achieved. I aged out at 18 while still in high school. Like every kid, I dreamed of having a forever family. But what I dreamed of most was to be with my biological family. In less than a year in foster care, my father terminated his parental rights. I was also up for adoption for 6 years. I’ve attended adoption parties, took pictures, and was even on the news; but never did I get adopted. Of course, like any child, I once believed the lie that I was unlovable and wasn’t worthy of a family. At 16 I accepted my fate, that permanency for me was not a family nor a home. I was a teen, a person of color, and rarely did I see those who looked like me get adopted.

Children and youth involved in the child welfare system are not just foster youth. Each is unique and share their own differences in culture, race, ethnicity, talents, purpose, and religion. There are multiple ways in which permanency can be achieved. Fostering real permanency for youth aging out of the system goes beyond just finding a home; it’s thinking through all possible barriers, such as implicit bias, institutional racism, and engaging youth in a meaningful and intentional way. To achieve this, I recommend the following:

- First, we must understand a youth’s identity shapes their experience; in other words, how youth see themselves may not be how others see them. Professionals involved in child welfare cases must be aware of their own implicit biases and be intentional in advancing equity across all areas on behalf of youth. Acknowledging youth’s full personhood, such as their unique stories, worldview, perspective, and lived experience, can promote inclusive efforts to ensure full authentic engagement of our youth, biological parents, social workers, attorneys, therapists, and volunteers involved in their case. This can help prevent unintentional barriers to achieving permanency or successful transition.
- Second, we must be committed to diversifying our efforts and embracing youth’s differences, in their identity, culture, and journey and/or lived experience. For instance, children and youth of color are less likely than their white counterparts to

⁴ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children’s Bureau, Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) FY2018 data. August 22, 2019. No. 26. Available at: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/afcarsreport26.pdf>.

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be adopted.⁵ Knowing and understanding youth's differences can reduce the minimization of their lived experience and promote non-discrimination efforts and equity in youths' chances to achieving permanency in adulthood.

- Third, we must be thoroughly informed of youth's familial background and lived experience and how it can potentially impact how they will transition. Youth who are susceptible to aging out are left with innate generational cycles added to their lived experience in child welfare. In other words, experiencing poverty that leads to neglect as a child and growing up in foster care can increase their chances of living in poverty. Identifying youth generational risk factors is essential to ensure youth that age out can achieve permanency in their adulthood, which will ultimately influence their identity in how they see themselves, their perception in how they interpret their experiences, their relationships in how they identify positive and healthy relationships, and their choices which will determine their outcomes. It is imperative that youth who do not achieve legal permanency achieve permanency in transition.
- Fourth, youth must also be thoroughly informed and aware of some of their privileges, such as access to financial support services, health care, vocational or college vouchers and waivers, and mental health support. A one size fits all approach is inadequate for youth. A youth that ages out must know their priorities and needs. In many cases, college may not be the next step for a youth. Hence, they must be informed of all their rights and services they have access to.
- Lastly, youth must be properly prepared and equipped to transition to adulthood. At some point services do expire, and it is imperative youth are fostered in positive self-efficacy. Assisting youth in identifying their protective factors and increasing their self-efficacy is critical. Such protective factors include establishing caring and supportive relationships, post-secondary educational attainment, reduced risk of homelessness, and improved psychological well-being and physical health.

Permanency was not achieved for me in my lived experience. However, like the collage, I used what was available to my best ability, by being informed of my familial background, knowing why I entered foster care, learning about my rights, becoming aware of the risk factors that were developed in my experience in foster care, and using my faith. These factors all helped me grow in finding permanency in an unconventional way and developing positive self-efficacy. Though my experience was not ideal or perfect, something beautiful came out of it. Today I'm a first-generation high school and college graduate and hope to build my own forever family.

Every child and youth is the future; thus, we must be diligent in our efforts in all aspects of youths' development to ensure permanency while in care or in adulthood. ■

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5 See, e.g., *supra*, footnote 4.